

Side Effects of Hepatitis C Treatment



H C V E D U C A T I O N A L S E R I E S

What are side effects?

Medicines can cause different changes or effects in the body. Some effects, like making you feel better, are the ones that you want and expect to happen. Other effects are ones that you don't want, or that you don't expect. The effects that you don't want or expect are called "side effects."

Nearly all medicines have side effects. Some people take aspirin for a headache, but it gives them an upset stomach. The upset stomach is a side effect of the aspirin. Not all side effects are unpleasant. Even the side effects that make you feel sick aren't always bad. Some side effects mean that your medicine has begun working. Others help your doctor decide how much medicine and what kind of medicine is right for you.

Will I have side effects from treatment for hepatitis C (HCV)?

Most people who get treated for hepatitis C have side effects. These side effects can be mild, or they can be severe. The same treatment can cause different side effects in different people. There is no way of predicting the side effects that you might have.

If you have side effects from your hepatitis C treatment, you should tell your doctor. If you think you might forget about them, write them down. Your doctor needs to know as much as possible about your side effects to help your treatment work better.

What are some of the unpleasant side effects of hepatitis C treatment?

There are many possible unpleasant side effects of HCV treatment, including:

- Feeling tired
- Fever and chills
- Feeling sick to your stomach, nausea, vomiting
- Not feeling hungry, or not eating as much as usual
- Feeling anxious, irritable or depressed
- Headaches and muscle aches
- Hair loss
- Not being able to sleep (insomnia)
- Dry, itchy and/or irritated skin, or rash
- Problems with thyroid disease or diabetes
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Low blood level (anemia)

If you experience any of these side effects, tell your doctor.

How can I reduce the unpleasant side effects of my hepatitis treatment?

Your doctor might give you special advice or medicines to help you reduce (or manage) the side effects from your treatment. Other side effects might go away by themselves, or become less unpleasant with time.

In the meantime, here are some ways that you can help yourself feel better.

- Drink plenty of clear liquids. Try to drink between 8 and 10 glasses of water or another clear liquid every day. Increase this amount if you are vomiting.

- Avoid drinks that have alcohol, caffeine (coffee, cola and strong tea) or lots of sugar (most soft drinks).
- Try to get plenty of sleep at night. Take short naps during the day.
- Eat small, nutritious meals. Crackers, clear sodas and ginger ale can help settle your stomach. Greasy, high fat foods (including most “fast food”) can make you feel worse. Try to eat even if you are not very hungry.
- Exercise lightly. Walking and lifting light weights are good exercises while you are on treatment.
- Take your medicine before you go to bed, so that you can sleep through the side effects.
- Take any pain relievers recommended by your doctor. Taking a pain reliever about a half hour before your interferon injection can help make the side effects less severe. Don’t take any pain reliever, however, unless your doctor says it’s okay.
- Avoid situations or “triggers” that make you feel worse, such as loud noises, bright lights, strong odors and/or skipped meals.
- Don’t color or perm your hair until after your treatment is finished.
- Don’t use harsh detergents or soaps that might irritate your skin. If you need suggestions, ask your doctor.
- Simple, unscented lotions can help dry, itchy skin. If taking ribavirin gives you a rash, benadryl lotion might help.

What can I do if I feel irritable, anxious or depressed from my treatment?

Your hepatitis C treatment might make you feel irritable, angry, anxious, depressed or confused. You might also have mood swings. If you feel any of these things, try to remember that they are only the side effects of your treatment, and that they will go away.

Some other things you can do to help include:

- Talk about your feelings with a family member, friend or someone else you trust.
- Tell people close to you when you are taking your treatment. Tell them that it can affect your moods.
- Join a support group.
- Avoid things that can make you feel stressed, like too much caffeine, sugar or nicotine.
- Learn ways to relax. Meditate or breathe quietly. Go for a walk or do some other light exercise.
- Take care of your body. Eat healthy meals, get lots of sleep and drink plenty of water.
- If you are taking medicine because you are depressed, be sure not to skip a dose. Keep all of your appointments with your psychiatrist or therapist.

If your mood swings or depression gets very severe, or if you have thoughts of suicide, call your doctor right away. There are other ways your doctor can help you.

If I have side effects, can’t I just reduce the amount of medicine I am taking?

No. The best way to deal with side effects is to talk with your doctor. If you reduce your medicine or stop taking it by yourself, then your treatment might not work. Also, your doctor might need to see your side effects before deciding what to do about them.

For more information and support call

- Your local VA Health Care facility and the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C web site (Internet address: <http://www.va.gov/hepatitisc>)
- The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line (1-888-4 HEP CDC) and web site (Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>)
- The American Liver Foundation
1-888-4HEP USA or 1-800-GO LIVER. Internet address: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>



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